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ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

Seventh United Nations Regional
Cartographic Conference for Africa

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Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso)

REGIONAL MACHINERY FOR THE CO ORDINATION OF LINGUISTIC DIVISIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

(Secretariat)

BACKGROUND

1. The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations recommended that a United Nations Regional Cartographic Conference for Africa be convened to deal specifically with cartographic issues pertaining to Africa. The present Conference is the seventh. It will be recalled that the first Conference was held in 1963 at a time many African States had just attained independence. Since that Conference, many country reports have reflected advances made in infrastructure development and successes scored in extending the field of area covered by topographical maps at various scales. There has been a dramatic change in the character of resolutions adopted reflecting more on development issues. These development issues include the establishment of co operative projects and programmes such as the setting up of regional Centres for services and training in surveying and mapping as well as user assistance Centres for remote sensing and, lately an organization with a co-ordinating role for the advancement of cartography and remote sensing in Africa. Primarily the activities of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) go beyond propagation of the science and technology of cartography and aim at addressing issues of socio economic development for a better life for all.

2. Beside the United Nations Regional Cartographic Conferences (for Asia and the Pacific, Africa and Americas) the United Nations convenes the meetings of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), then the United Nations Conference of the Standardization of Geographical Names. The Conference and the Group of Experts deal with geographical names and their functions though distinct, they aim at obtaining standardized names through proven methods and guidelines to national geographical names authorities. It is established that the Conference as well as the Group of Experts should reach national committees or authorities through Linguistic Divisions. Africa is divided into: Africa Central Division, Africa East Division, Africa West Division and the following countries come under the Arabic Division that comprise Arab speaking countries of the middle East and the Gulf: Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Libya Arab Jamahiriya, Tunisia, Morocco, Somalia and the Sudan. It will be noted that the secretariat of the ECA was instrumental in the establishment of the third Division of Africa Central 1/.

1/ Resolution 26 of the Third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, 1977, Athens, Greece.

The purpose in seeking an additional Division was to creat the opportunity for the group of States in Central Africa sub region that is predominantly French speaking to find itself in matters of standardization of geographical names, since governments in this area had embarked on carrying out their own mapping programmes.

3. A brief look at the mapping situation in Africa, the amount of work executed after independence or better still in the past 20 years reveals less than 30 per cent. It has been also noted that a number of enviable national cartographic institutions have declined and/or even collapsed. The element to ponder upon is whether many national geographical names authorities where they existed are still strong or even existing? The past 20 years have been characterized by frequent changes of governments sometimes violently. In a number of cases there have been forced movements of populations very often across frontiers. A lot of damage done to habitations, villages, communication systems as well as to people and old persons who by African traditions are the custodians of culture including languages and unwritten history.

4. The coming of independence brought with it the urge to put right the wrong, in some cases introducing wrong toponymy. The practice where legitimization did follow the processes of established rules and guidelines recommenced by the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. Africa has seen the renaming of features as often as new leader ship comes to power. Moreover, there have been cases where living personages have named geographical features after themselves and on death or being deposed the names are changed. Having seen that it takes a lot of trouble, time and scarce foreign exchange to publish a topo map at 1:50 000, yet a feature may cover several sheets in some cases extending beyond national frontiers the inconveniences are also extended to the international community and organizations such as the International Civil Aviation to name but one.

5. On the other hand, responsible governments of Angola, Zaire and Zimbabwe as an example have informed the world of names changed and having followed the established rules. It is true that occupying colonial powers more often distorted indegenous names through lack of sympathy and understanding or by deliberate imposition of their dominance. African maps still bear hundreds of thousands of such names. The accusing finger cannot be pointed only at former colonial powers. Today, there are African countries or cultures as well as ethnic groups under non indigenous occupation, alien rule or occupation. It is expected and it should be that Africa must resist change or force a change of local indigenous toponymy in persuance of perpetuating domination to the disadvantage of minorities or the supressed (even if in majority). Earlier while listing

Linguistic Divisions for Africa it was not omission that the Dutch German Division includes South Africa. There is no logic that the majority of the population with its own languages and where natural features in their land had their names erased that these features now carry European ones. These people are neither represented nor the richness of their languages brought to the attention of the world community and the Conference itself.

LINGUISTIC DIVISIONS

6. Turning to activities of Linguistic divisions the problems in Africa are enormous. The Divisions have to assist in tackling transcription and transliteration problems resulting from inherited colonial structures namely English and French orthography The Arabic Division needs to work closely with other Divisions in Africa as languages and ethnicity do not respect man made boundaries. Another difficulty facing Africa Divisions is lack of funds to organize toponymic training courses or workshops. Africa with some 28 States classified as Least Developed Countries the bulk of this group being in Africa south of the Sahara, is still plagued by economic crises. The Organization of African Unity in its areas of priority action recommended that at sub regional, regional and continental levels "African States should take steps to set up or strengthen sub-regional ... economic groupings, in a rational and harmonized framework so as to ensure an effective co-operation among member States first of the same sub region and then among the different regional economic groupings" 1/. At international level APPER stresses " - strengthening of solidarity and consultations among African States is necessary for a better awareness of Africa's interests - owing to the fact that Africa is lagging behind technologically, it should insist within the Specialized Agencies of the United Nations for special treatment to be accorded particularly in the areas of technical co-operation, training and research".

CO-ORDINATION

7. Document E/ECA/NRD/CART/136 on Status of Standardization of Geographical Names in the Africa East Division reminds the Conference of the role of linguistic divisions. We have seen that United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) has different Working Groups dealing with specialized areas in the standardization of geographical names. We have noted

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1/ Africa's Priority Programme for Economic Recovery (APPER) 1986-1990.

that the deliberations of the Group of Experts are finally looked into by the Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. World Cartography Vol. XVIII 2/ devoted to the standardization of geographical names ably puts together nearly almost all that is needed to know about this topic. But the African situation of under development lack of resources to bring awareness to policy makers of the need to consider standardized geographical names as an indispensable tool to safeguarding heritage and history itself as well as a mark of nation s credibility.

8. It may be pointed out Africa needs more help in term of organizing toponymic courses. Above all it needs to co-ordinate its Divisions in order to bridge gaps that continue to divide the African peoples among linguistic camps. The co ordination that is advanced in this paper intends to integrate efforts of linguistic Divisions into Africa's economic development and structural transformation programmes. If the Conference or the Divisions themselves feel that linguistic activities being co-ordinated from outside Africa offers the best choice, one element will have been achieved and that is Africa will continue to receive ready made answers for its development problems rather than participate in the seemingly laborious process of finding its own identity and aligning itself with the way Africa is approaching its development problems. In this regard, the seventh United Nations Regional Cartographic Conference for Africa is well placed to recommend a system or machinery for the better design and co-ordination of regional projects with regard to standardization of geographical names. This does not interfere with the present structural arrangement, but assists in strengthening strategies for the development of reliable maps in Africa, at the same time safeguarding national interests in this field.

CONCLUSION

9. The Agenda item on this topic calls for an inter-divisional co-ordinating machinery. The views and recommendations will be respected by the United Nations as provisions were made to accommodate views and proposals that will strengthen the standardization. By way of conclusion, below are two extracts from "Africa and the Africans and their Historic Challenge".

> "Indeed, my aim today is to share with you my perception of the nature, content,scope and complexity of the

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2/ UN Sales No. E.85.1.23.

> historic challenge that faces Africa and the Africans. Unless this challenge is addressed urgently, vigorously and persistently with all our considerable human and natural resources, Africa and the Africans will remain in perpetuity the underdogs of the world marginalized, peripheral exploited and despised ..... As we all know, development is a systematic and interactive process. The African development problematic has its root cause in the brakdown of the system (cultural, linguistic etc) and the lack of effective sectoral linkages .

10. It is not advocated to set up an institution for this purpose but that the role should remain within the United Nations through its Commission the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA).

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